



June 1, 1983

Mr. J. Peter Grace  
Chairman  
Executive Committee  
President's Private Sector Survey on  
Cost Control in the Federal Government  
1850 'K' Street, NW  
Suite 1150  
Washington, DC 20006

Dear Mr. Grace:

We are writing you as scientists deeply concerned about the continued health and viability of one of the nation's great treasures--the National Institutes of Health (NIH).

We have had the opportunity to examine the Private Sector Survey Task Force Report dealing with the Public Health Service, particularly with the NIH. First we wholeheartedly agree with the Task Force observation that far too much control of the day-to-day activities of NIH-NIMH is exercised at the PHS or DHHS level. We are pleased to see the recommendation that program management responsibility be decentralized back to NIH-NIMH. Each of us has been associated with this wonderful institution for much of our scientific and professional careers and have no trouble remembering a time 15 to 20 years ago when the Institutes' business was conducted quite effectively with very much smaller oversight functions at the level of the Office of the Assistant Secretary or the Office of the Secretary. In our view the gradual accumulation of bureaucratic layers above us has made the conduct of research more difficult while adding to its overall costs. If any benefits have come from these proliferating administrative layers, they are not clear to us as working scientists and scientific leaders. In our view, a return to the decentralized authority of 15 to 20 years ago could not only save very substantial sums of money, but also improve the productivity of NIH-NIMH scientists and scientific administrators.

We were, however, extremely distressed to note that the Task Force made several recommendations for substantial cuts in the actual operating components of the NIH-NIMH institutes--the very meat of our biomedical research efforts. Especially alarming were the proposed elimination of some 662 unfilled positions. It is inherent in the nature of a scientific enterprise such as this to have a high level of turnover as young scientists are constantly

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coming here for training and leaving to assume leadership in scientific programs throughout the United States. This healthy rate of turnover results in a substantial number of vacancies existing at any given time; to eliminate them would rob the programs of their flexibility. Furthermore, to require the inclusion of all scientists under our FTE ceilings would, in fact, gut some of our most important training programs--the very lifeblood of any high quality scientific enterprise. Though inconsistencies in the figures make it hard to be precise, the net effect of these recommendations would be to reduce our research force by more than 15 percent. Coming on top of congressionally mandated special programs that already are drawing resources away from our core efforts, these cuts would be disastrous and would require the elimination of entire laboratories and programs.

The Task Force recommendation that some 20 percent of the top managers and supervisors (34 out of 146) be eliminated is truly startling. These include the scientific directors, and laboratory and branch chiefs, comprising the research leaders whose scientific accomplishments account in considerable measure for the esteem with which these programs are held throughout the world. Further, by assuming administrative responsibilities along with their research, these scientific leaders provide a "buffer" for their colleagues, leaving them free to pursue research with all of their energies. There is simply no "fat" here.

The concerns we are expressing are not simply about the intramural components of the NIH-NIMH. The health of the entire biomedical research establishment--one area in which the U.S. has managed to maintain its leadership in the world--depends upon the continued vitality of the intramural programs. The intramural programs serve as the major center for the training of investigators who staff research labs throughout the country. In addition, by virtue of their stability and critical mass, they are able to undertake long-term investigations in areas of fundamental importance that grant-supported, university-based research groups would not be able to do. The NIH-NIMH intramural programs have had a particularly vital role in the development of new research methods which quickly achieve wide application throughout the nation's research community. The "cost-effectiveness" of the intramural programs was recently highlighted by a startling statistic. An analysis of the most frequently cited papers in biomedical research over a recent 15-year period (Current Contents, Dec. 1978) revealed that, compared to all "outside" institutions that do research, the intramural programs of the NIH-NIMH produced 3.2 times more of the seminal, highly-cited papers per unit cost. Intramural research is truly a bargain.

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We are aware that the task Force was working under considerable time pressure. This is reflected in the many factual errors and internal inconsistencies in the report. We urge you to seek wider consultation on these vitally important matters so that members of the scientific community can join seriously with responsible citizens to contribute to the careful and efficient stewardship of a great institution.

It seems appropriate to close this letter with a quote from our scientific colleague, the noted author, Dr. Lewis Thomas.

"We seem to be living through a period (transient, I hope) of public disillusion and discouragement over government and all its works. At all levels, bureaucracy in general is mistrusted, here and abroad. The word is out that government doesn't really work, can't get things right, wastes public money, fumbles along, stalls, gets in the way. At such a time, it lifts the heart to look closely at one institution created by the United States government which has been achieving, since its outset, one spectacular, stunning success after another. The National Institutes of Health is not only the largest institution for biomedical science on earth, it is one of this nation's great treasures. As social inventions for human betterment go, this one is a standing proof that, at least once in a while, government possesses the capacity to do something unique, imaginative, useful, and altogether right."

Sincerely,

Julius Axelrod, Ph.D.

Christian B. Anfinsen, Ph.D.

Marshall W. Nirenberg, Ph.D.

D. Carleton Gajdusek, M.D.

Nobel Laureates